



Sustaining the good man: Re-authoring when belonging is conditional then withdrawn

by Janet Pelly



Janet Pelly is a Melbourne-based narrative practitioner and writer whose work explores identity, dignity and relational care in contexts of structural injustice. For more than 10 years, she has worked alongside people affected by Australia's immigration detention system, integrating narrative practice with advocacy and collective witnessing. Her interests include double-story development over time, anticipatory uncertainty, and the redistribution of care when agency is constrained. She writes on detention-related topics for Michael West Media and Eureka Street and collaborates regularly with pro bono law firm Human Rights For All. janetpelly@icloud.com

Abstract

This article is written as a companion to “Discovering the good man: Double-story development with a survivor of repetitive ongoing trauma in immigration detention” (Pelly, 2019). While the earlier paper explored double-story development within continuous detention, this article examines what becomes of re-authored identity when detention recurs after a period of relative freedom. Drawing on sustained narrative conversations and advocacy alongside a man referred to as Yasin, it traces key themes in his personal life alongside renewed volatility in Australian immigration debate and policy. Through a profound experience of caregiving, followed by protective narrowing and collective holding after re-detention, the paper explores shifts in double-story development. Rather than focusing on expansion of preferred identity claims, it examines what enables those claims to endure when agency and freedom are withdrawn.

Key words: *Double-story development, immigration detention, conditional belonging, collective holding, re-authoring, recurrence, protective narrowing, dignity, political volatility, narrative therapy, narrative practice*

Pelly, J. (2026). Sustaining the good man: Re-authoring when belonging is conditional then withdrawn. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.4320/BWKG6778>

Author pronouns: she/her

Context

This article is a companion to “Discovering the good man: Double story development with a survivor of repetitive ongoing trauma in immigration detention” (Pelly, 2019), which can be downloaded from <https://doi.org/10.4320/BWKG6778>. In that paper, I asked whether double-story development was possible within a traumatising system like immigration detention, and whether someone who considered themselves “100% bad” could develop a new perspective.

The focus of the 2019 paper was on Yasin's¹ efforts to reclaim his identity from institutional definition, both as a member of a persecuted minority and as a detained asylum seeker. The “good man” identity that emerged over years was grounded in re-membered acts of protection, loyalty and refusal to harm others, despite horrific trauma. Through testimony and outsider witnessing (Denborough, 2005), injury was acknowledged without defining the whole person (White, 2004, 2007).

In 2022, Yasin was released from almost nine years in closed immigration detention. After almost four years living in the Australian community, he was returned to detention. While it is hard to fathom why closed administrative detention would be considered appropriate for someone with his particular trauma history, that is not within the scope of this paper. My focus here is on the arc between a period of relative freedom and renewed detention, and the events that have influenced Yasin's identity project.

A note on “good” and “bad”

The term “bad man” come from the 2019 paper and is Yasin's own. When we first met, he described himself in absolute terms: “I'm 100% bad. You'll never meet a man bad like me”.

The term “good man” originates from a question I put back to him: What does it mean to be 100% bad? What would being good look like to you? Yasin's responses proved my assumptions wrong and revealed much about his values and

beliefs: causing pain to his family was greater than any other offence he could think of.

Despite wanting to be true to his words and to our work together, I'm equally aware that a good-bad binary is reductive. Read through a Western lens, “good man” can imply a fixed, individually authored self – one identity, correctly named, replacing another. Of interest is Tileah Drahm-Butler's work on how narrative therapy can reproduce this same flattening when it isn't attentive to whose worldview is doing the naming. She argues instead for identity stories that stay open and relational rather than settling into a single verdict (Drahm-Butler, 2015).

While I haven't softened or theorised it in the retelling, it's worth noting that Yasin's verdict has become more layered and nuanced over time.

A reasonable observer might ask what worldview sits underneath labels like good and bad. It is certainly different for Yasin and myself, shaped by different influences, ethics and notions of a singular bounded self. My experience with narrative practice has matured over almost a decade of working with Yasin, and continues to develop from imperfect beginnings.

A note on positioning

My connection with Yasin precedes my involvement in narrative practice and remains primarily personal – I consider him chosen family, and he has used the same descriptor for me. This is not incidental to the paper's method; it shapes what kind of account this is. Friendship and family are not neutral descriptors in this context. Where the state positions Yasin through a series of institutional relationships – case manager, officer, delegate, decision-maker – naming our relationship as family is a political act as much as a personal one.

Vikki Reynolds's writing on ally positioning is useful here: I am committed to forms of allyship that are fluid, imperfect and relationally embedded in the hope of staying accountable to those I am working and living alongside (Reynolds, 2013). This positioning carries real complication. The structurally different

positions that Yasin and I occupy mean that even friendship operates on unequal ground. Protecting his autonomy, especially while the state continues to assert authority over his life, has required deliberate work: checking in with him about what I write and how, resisting the urge to speak for him, and staying alert to the ways my privilege (and his lack of it) operates. Advocacy and allyship, in this sense, are not separate from the friendship – they are what the friendship requires under these conditions.

Identity after release, identity under return

After Yasin's release from closed detention in 2022, his identity questions shifted away from bad and good towards how to make use of small but significant freedoms.

The period that followed was not a simple transition but a slow process of learning how to live in ordinary spaces. Aware that his belonging was discretionary, Yasin continued to experience frequent episodes of anxiety, hypervigilance and emotional overwhelm. However, there were also moments of ease and purpose, especially when he was able to take responsibility for something beyond himself.

When he was unexpectedly re-detained in late 2025, the questions shifted again: What, if anything, could be sustained when freedom was withdrawn? How could he imagine a future when he had so little control over the present?

This paper traces identity across three phases: conditional belonging in the community, recurrence through re-detention and the relational practices that sustain a person in difficult circumstances. It engages three intertwined concerns. First, recurrence as a challenge to the durability of double-story development. Double-story practice emphasises the identification and thickening of preferred identity commitments alongside acknowledgment of injury (White, 2004). But what happens when those commitments cannot be enacted?

Does identity persist as narrative memory, or does it require embodied repetition?

Second, identity within sociopolitical instability. Yasin's period of release coincided with Australian immigration policy and discourse that increasingly centred on risk, control and securitisation.

Third, the way in which preferred identity is expressed and embedded in daily life. During his time in the community, Yasin took on a caregiving role that anchored him in time, responsibility and social connection. When re-detention interrupted that relationship, it disrupted more than attachment. It destabilised a structure through which the "good man" identity had been tested, then embodied. Taken together, these three concerns shifted the challenges of double-story development from expansion to endurance.

Freedom lite

Yasin's long-awaited freedom had come in the form of residence determination, an arrangement designed to accommodate people with health and other vulnerabilities outside the formal detention system. He lived at a designated address, and while he could move around freely during the day, there was a curfew and any travel or overnight stays required permission. He was given a small stipend but no right to work or study, and his status could be revoked at any time.

Rather than focus on the restrictions, Yasin valued small acts of agency – deciding what to cook, when to sleep, where to ride his bike. Neighbours became friends, and he enjoyed seeing their children grow up. His life stabilised while belonging remained conditional and incomplete.

Small acts of resistance clarified his values, hopes and aspirations. One night, we went to a restaurant that offered refugees and asylum seekers 20% off the bill. Yasin refused to claim it and instead left a generous tip. Refusing the discount was not a rejection of generosity or solidarity. For Yasin, paying the full bill had greater currency because it was what a citizen would

do. “Refugee, asylum seeker, foreigner – I hate those names because they make me different. I want to be myself, belong somewhere.”

Through a narrative lens, this moment highlighted the distinction between labels and identity. Terms such as refugee and asylum seeker generate legal, policy and welfare responses. Yasin experienced these as narrowing, even totalising, and rejected them. He was drawn to more meaningful aspects of his identity: neighbour, friend, carer, diner.

The restaurant exchange also highlighted how preferred identity is often expressed in ordinary ways rather than dramatic acts of resistance. Paying the full bill and leaving a tip were small actions, but they were meaningful to Yasin because they were consistent with his values and aspirations. In this moment he chose to participate on equal terms.

Writer Dina Nayeri (2019) has described the pressure placed on people seeking asylum to perform a particular kind of story – gratitude, redemption, transformation into what she calls “the Good Immigrant” – in order to be seen as deserving. Paying the full bill was, in part, Yasin’s refusal of that performance. He was not declining a discount so much as declining to play the role it assumed.

Habibi, my son:

Unconditional belonging

Two years into his release from closed detention, Yasin’s mental health had not significantly improved. Intrusive symptoms persisted despite mental health support and medication, and he found talk therapy unhelpful: “Every time, they want to talk about my childhood and my pain and I can’t do that anymore.”

His psychiatrist suggested that a pet might provide companionship and routine, and when a local family’s new cat had an unexpected litter, Yasin offered to adopt one of the kittens. He named him Habibi.

The impact was immediate – despite being wary around new people, he visited twice a week while Habibi was being weaned and formed a warm connection with the family. When he took Habibi home at 10 weeks, Yasin’s days revolved around feeding, cleaning and playing with the kitten. He went for walks with Habibi in a front-pack, enjoying easy conversation with other animal lovers at the local park and shops.

Caring for Habibi allowed commitments identified in earlier narrative work – protection, responsibility, reliability – to be enacted on a daily basis. Yasin took on the role of provider and protector, in stark contrast to his previous roles. Habibi’s presence offered more than companionship. The “good man” identity explored during detention found new expression. Habibi benefited from Yasin’s constant care, presence and reliability, and thrived.

Yasin soon referred to Habibi as “my son”. This marked an important identity shift. In detention, he had been the object of management. In release, he became a carer, responsible for another life.

For anyone living under revocable status, investing in a primary relationship is significant but risky. On some nights, Yasin pushed the couch against the door before sleeping, convinced that Australian Border Force (ABF) officers would force their way in during the night. In the morning, he fed and played with Habibi. A keenly felt loss of control and responsibility coexisted.

“I’m happy”

Despite the restrictions of residence determination, Yasin did have opportunities to travel. On a trip to Far North Queensland, after a drive through the forest and swimming in a local waterhole, he stood waiting to be served at a beachfront café. He turned to me and called out, “I’m happy”.

The café owner’s voice came from behind the coffee machine, “You should feel like that every day!”

We discussed that moment later in the day.

“When you said ‘I’m happy’, what were you noticing?”

“How I feel free. Next to the beach, nice people, no worries”. He paused. “It was real happy. Not fake happy, just to send a photo, make my mum feel good.”

“You looked surprised”, I observed.

“Yes! Because I haven’t had many times like this. Nothing really happening, just feeling happy and enjoy.”

In earlier narrative work, the “good man” had emerged through refusal – refusal to harm, refusal to stand by and witness harm. Here, it appeared as ease. In his words, “Not refugee or asylum seeker. Just Yasin, a man on holiday”.

Much later, when visiting him in renewed detention, I recalled this conversation. Not to restore optimism, but to remind us that Yasin had lived in a different frame.

“What did that day mean?” I asked.

“I liked just being who I am, not worrying, not thinking about what happens tomorrow,” he explained.

Uncertainty meets volatility

Well before he was re-detained, Yasin had spoken of a persistent sense that “they will come”. “If they want to, they will come and there’s nothing I can do.” These statements were matter of fact but carried a heavy weight.

When his case manager left messages requesting time to discuss “your ongoing stay in Australia”, Yasin interpreted the phrasing as ominous.

It would be easy to view this exclusively through a trauma lens, but narrative practice emphasises that identity is negotiated within sociopolitical contexts (White, 2004) and for those living under discretionary power, shifts in rhetoric and policy are quickly and keenly felt. This resists a model of

trauma as a bounded, past event to be processed and resolved. Writing from a context of sustained and unresolved political violence, Palestinian psychiatrist Dr Samah Jabr (2025) has argued that where danger is ongoing rather than historical, trauma cannot be framed as something a person is simply recovering from – there is no safe distance from which to look back. Yasin’s vigilance was not a symptom of unprocessed history; it was an accurate read of his current circumstances.

In November 2023, he watched as the High Court of Australia ruled in a case called *NZYQ v Minister for Immigration* that indefinite administrative detention of a noncitizen without clear purpose was unlawful. The unanimous decision ended decades of this controversial practice and people who could not be returned to their countries of origin (or deported elsewhere) were released into the community.

The decision set off a political firestorm. Legislative amendments enabled the application of visa conditions usually reserved for terrorism offences, such as ankle bracelets, curfews and jail terms for noncompliance. Media coverage referred to the cohort as “foreign criminals” (Melzer, 2024) of “appalling character” (Crowley & Caisley, 2025), quoting politicians who claimed that harsh measures were necessary for community safety.

Yasin followed these developments closely. Although not subject to the same conditions, he was aware that a wider immigration debate could open up, just as it had when the “stop the boats” campaign re-started offshore processing in 2013, the year he arrived in Australia (Lester, 2018). He was also concerned because some of the men were friends he’d met in detention. “Just because I’m not personally affected, doesn’t mean it’s okay. It’s not.”

Over the next year, disturbing accounts filtered through. Parents barred from visiting their children’s schools, men threatened with jail if they couldn’t get home by 10pm, constant “welfare checks” that verged on interrogation. Then came punitive legislative amendments, which could apply to anyone without citizenship. “Then I stopped feeling like I wasn’t affected.”

Removal

When ABF officers arrived to revoke Yasin's residence determination early one morning in December 2025, the process unfolded quickly. Yasin was presented with a warrant and informed he would be returned to immigration detention immediately.

What was it like?

"To be honest, they were respectful. A hundred per cent better than being moved between detention centres. But still the flashbacks, same as every time."

What did he see?

"It was 1982 and we were kids playing in the home, just laughing and enjoying. I was five years old and my brothers a bit older. Next minute, Saddam's men break down the door and take all of us to jail."

When the officers saw Yasin shaking and distressed, they slowed down, allowing him time to pack, have a smoke and go into the next room to settle Habibi. "I saw one officer so upset and I see she understands."

He called friends but none picked up, so the officers said the RSPCA could be contacted to collect and foster out Habibi. "I said no, this is my son. I don't want strangers around him." The emotional impact made him remember what other men had told him about dawn raids on their family homes. "They tell me about their kids watching them in handcuffs, crying and holding on to them. I've heard this many times, but I never really understood that pain."

Dispossession

By the time friends arrived, Yasin was gone, and we were informed by the property manager that the locks would be changed by the end of the day. What had been his private space had to be emptied within hours. We refused her offer of assistance and packed up everything

that belonged to Yasin; the institutional objects (furniture, electricals, cookware and utensils) would remain for the next person.

With several people packing at once, there was a risk that valued belongings might be left behind. Yasin was uncontactable, so items considered nonessential – like a cat scratching post and a bag of feed for ducks at the local park – were discarded. Plants he had nurtured remained in the yard. Clothes may have been left in the washing machine. This felt like a crude dismantling of Yasin's private life, and I wondered which parts of him might be lost in the process. When I expressed my concerns to his friend Ahmed, he shrugged and said, "This is our life".

I asked Yasin later how he felt. His response was similar. "It's okay. When you were packing up my stuff, I didn't think about it. How many times I've told you this happens when they move me? With you, at least I know nothing was stolen." He was pleased that the property manager had agreed to stay away.

Agency, authorship and continuity

In narrative practice, questions of agency and authorship are central to sustaining a sense of identity across disruptive circumstances (White, 2007).

Incarceration had repeatedly stripped Yasin of personal autonomy and property – during childhood imprisonment, deportation, displacement and transfer between Australian detention centres. Each time he was moved, the same pattern recurred: teams of uniformed guards came without warning, usually before dawn. He would be given minutes to pack up his personal effects and had to leave the rest behind, hoping it made it to the next place.

Packing Yasin's belongings without him there felt uncomfortably close to those institutional processes. Strangely, the impact was most keenly felt by people with more secure status and privilege. When I asked Yasin about this,

he said: “Because you have control over your life. For me, it’s happened many times and I only get hurt if I try to stop it.”

So, how does he sustain identity when disruption is constant? Where is agency and authorship located in a chaotic system? In this instance, it was what he could salvage in a situation outside his control: trust in others to protect his dignity when he could not.

I asked him what he had been able to control when he was removed: “A lot more than other times. When they wanted to take my phone, I said no and they didn’t take it. I said no handcuffs and they said okay. When I was upset about leaving Habibi, they let me have time alone with him. When I saw the officer get upset, I understood she knew what was happening was wrong.”

Beaudoin’s (2005) narrative map of agency and choice in the face of trauma was useful here: even where the larger circumstances cannot be altered, seemingly small moments can function as meaningful acts of authorship, resisting the totalising narrative of powerlessness that institutional processes can impose.

Interpreting loss, preserving identity

Freedom had shifted the “good man” identity from aspiration into everyday practice. When he was re-detained, Yasin could have easily slipped back into negative self-perception. That didn’t happen.

Rather than accepting this as his fate, he felt aggrieved by the decision and the constant refusal to explain why he was being uprooted. “Day by day I built my home. Then when I was putting on the roof, they come along, destroy it and kick me out.”

I asked what that metaphor meant to him: “I did everything I could to get healthy and build a good life. If before, I had 1% feeling I could be free, it’s gone. They’ve showed me I’m nothing to them, like a donkey they can put on a lead and take anywhere they want. Even when they be nice, there’s a limit – after that, always force.”

His metaphor captured the experience of repeated effort followed by abrupt dismantling, a pattern that had occurred at multiple points across his life.

Letters of support were important at this time, as both witnessing and scaffolding. They resourced advocacy efforts, and in doing so, documented and preserved Yasin’s preferred identity claims: kindness, care and belonging. In the absence of any formal opportunity for Yasin to explain his life and actions, these letters ensured that his identity was not defined solely by bureaucrats and politicians.

Habibi, still my son

In the early weeks, Yasin focused almost entirely on Habibi. While he had no feeling to talk, he wanted to hear about his son: Is he eating? Is he playing? Is he okay when it’s hot?

This narrowing of focus could be interpreted as withdrawal, but it appeared to operate as a form of protection. By concentrating on the one relationship where he held primary responsibility, Yasin maintained a foothold in his preferred identity.

Caring for Habibi allowed commitments that had previously been spoken about – protection, reliability, responsibility – to remain active even within the confines of detention.

Over time, this foothold began to widen. Yasin asked for help for men without legal representation, rushed to assist when an elderly man in a wheelchair became disoriented, and agreed to come to visits. These actions did not suggest acceptance of his situation, but they did indicate that his preferred identity was intact. Even on what he called the “Death Road”, Yasin continued to orient himself towards responsibility and care.

Conclusion

“Discovering the Good Man” (2019) asked whether negative identity can be challenged and preferred

identity claimed while a person remains inside a traumatising system. This paper has asked a different question: what sustains that identity when freedom is briefly granted, then withdrawn?

Release in 2022 allowed Yasin to enact the “good man” identity in ordinary ways: through care, routine and responsibility. Re-detention removed the setting in which these commitments could be practised, but it did not erase the identity that had been established.

Experiences of powerlessness and despair were real. Yet Yasin did not return to the “100% bad” or even “30% bad” story (Pelly, 2019). Instead, he saw himself as trapped in an unpredictable and harmful system. He narrowed his focus and continued to show care and responsibility within these renewed constraints.

Sustaining this identity did not occur in isolation. Friends packed up his home, fostered Habibi and documented his life through letters of support, articulating moral injury and making preferred identity claims visible to decision-makers in government.

The evidence here suggests that preferred identity can endure even when freedom is withdrawn. Double-story development, in this context, is not expansion but durability – the capacity to maintain preferred identity

commitments when the circumstances for enacting them are severely constrained.

This is not the shape of a hero’s journey, in which trial gives way to transformation and eventual triumphant return. There is no return here and no guarantee one is coming. The more honest shape is circular and unresolved – freedom, loss, endurance, freedom again, loss again – a structure that asks readers to find meaning in repetition and constraint rather than in arrival.

What remains uncertain is not who Yasin is, but whether and when the structures around him will allow that identity to be lived openly again.

Postscript

Since this paper was submitted, Yasin has been released again, this time on a bridging visa with work rights but no study, training or travel outside Australia allowed. His future remains uncertain while his immigration status is resolved.

Note

- ¹ All identifying details have been altered to protect confidentiality. The person whose experiences are described has given informed consent. As the article was too complex for him to read independently in English, I read it aloud to him and incorporated his reflections on how his words and experiences are represented.

References

- Beaudoin, M.-N. (2005). Agency and choice in the face of trauma: A narrative therapy map. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 24, 32–50.
- Crowley, T., & Caisley, O. (2025, February 16). Nauru to take non-citizen NZYQ cohort freed from immigration detention. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-16/nauru-agrees-to-settle-group-of-nzyq-cohort/104942562>
- Denborough, D. (2005). A framework for receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3–4), 34–42.
- Drahm-Butler, T. (2015). Decolonising identity stories: Narrative practice through Aboriginal eyes. In B. Wingard, C. Johnson, & T. Drahm-Butler (Eds.), *Aboriginal narrative practice: Honouring storylines of pride, strength and creativity* (pp. 25–48). Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Jabr, S. (2025). *Radiance in pain and resilience: The global reverberation of Palestinian historical trauma*. Wakefield Press.
- Lester, E. (2018). *Making migration law: The foreigner, sovereignty, and the case of Australia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Melzer, M. (2024, November 6). Dan Tehan claims Albanese government's emergency immigration laws "just a charade" with zero preventative detention applications made. *Sky News*. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/dan-tehan-claims-albanese-governments-emergency-immigration-laws-just-a-charade-with-zero-preventative-detention-applications-made/news-story/86b10875bec980e64c089f85ba1e3545>
- Migration Amendment (Removal and Other Measures) Bill 2024. (Cth.). https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/bd/bd2324a/24bd066
- Nayeri, D. (2019). *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you*. Canongate.
- NZYQ v Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs (2023), S28/2023. <https://www.hcourt.gov.au/cases-and-judgments/cases/decided/case-s282023>
- Pelly, J. (2019). Discovering the good man: Double story development with a survivor of repetitive ongoing trauma in immigration detention. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 29–39.
- Reynolds, V. (2013). "Leaning in" as imperfect allies in community work. *Narrative and Conflict*, 1(1), 53–75.
- White, M. (2004). Narrative practice and exotic lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life. *Dulwich Centre Journal*, (1), 46–53.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.